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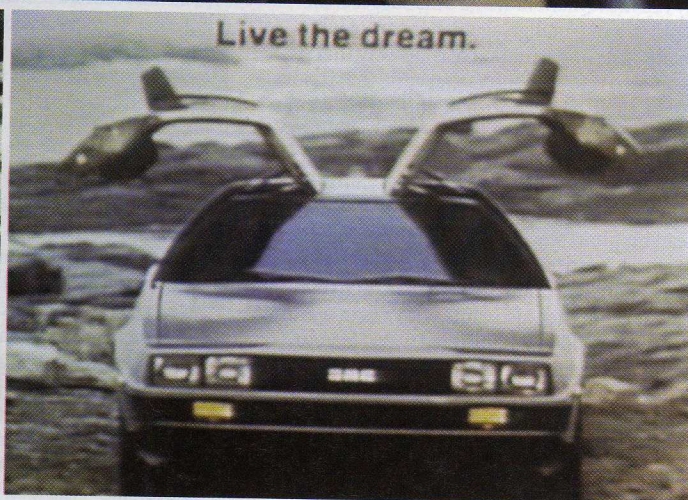
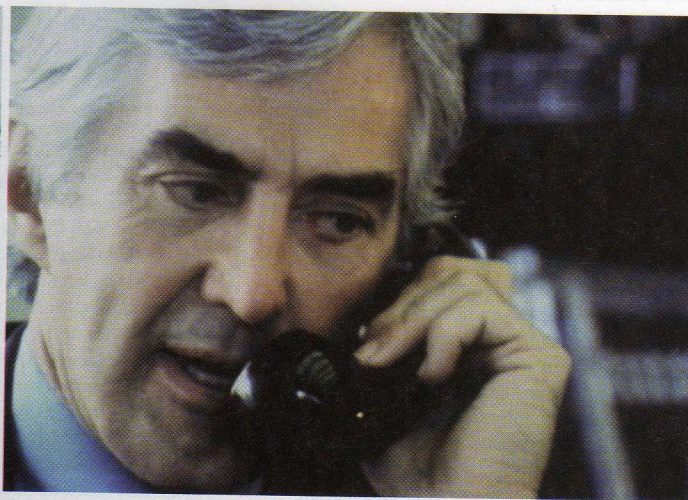
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THE ARCHIVE REANIMATED



Crash and burn: 'Make it New John' explored the doomed relationship between the American entrepreneur John DeLorean and Belfast car workers

Artist Duncan Campbell's poetic studies of figures from recent history challenge the very notion of biographical narrative

By John Beagles

In his seminal text, *The Language of New Media*, theorist Lev Manovich asks, "how can our new abilities to store vast amounts of data, to automatically classify, index, link, search and instantly retrieve it, lead to new kinds of narrative?" The issue for Manovich is that the gigantic digital database corpus that speeds and flows beyond our ken is at its core anti-narrative; as he says, the "world appears to us as an endless and unstructured collection of images, texts and other data records". Material is omnipresent and stored but exists in a relatively inert, unfiltered state. Manovich calls the task of creating intelligible sequences from these latent clouds of digital material the "database narrative problem". The challenge for Manovich is how to reanimate this material, to create new stories and to give it all shape in "a poetics, aesthetic and ethics of the database".

Duncan Campbell is an artist well attuned to answering Manovich's call. His engagement with the 'narrative problem' has seen him immerse

himself in the archival database, creating a series of complex, self-reflexive and poetic films: *Bernadette* (2008), *Make it New John* (2009) and *Arbeit* (2011). In all these, the struggles, anxieties and tensions of trying to know the past, to capture its dynamics and to reanimate historical subjects in the present, reverberate.

The people and historical instants Campbell chooses to resurrect are always highly distinctive. In this respect, the films appear to echo writer and filmmaker Hito Steyerl's call for artists today to "unfreeze the forces congealed within the trash of history". For Steyerl, this unfreezing must focus on figures and objects that function as "fossilised nodes" in which the tensions of a historical moment have petrified. In *Bernadette*, Campbell's portrait of the Northern Irish activist Bernadette Devlin, his sifting through the media archives (the trash of history) thawed out a key aspect of the turbulent dynamics of Northern Irish politics between 1969 and 1974. Likewise, in *Make it New John*, the iconic symbol of DeLorean (the car and man) acted as a cipher for the complex, ultimately doomed relationship between American car manufacturing, incompetent nascent Thatcherite entrepreneurialism and painful consequences for Belfast factory workers. In *Arbeit*, the economist Hans Tietmeyer's role in the introduction of the Euro,

German reunification and the recent economic collapse were woven together in a complex text and meta-text. Against the background of self-serving English historical amnesia regarding Northern Ireland and the roots of the neoliberal restoration project (as David Harvey terms it), these choices are highly prescient, not least in their staging of the intersections of class, economics and nationalism.

These are films deeply indented by technological advances and their concomitant philosophical doubts. Where once filmmakers attempted to divine social forces at work through first-hand documentation (veracity and vérité), Campbell achieves the same aim through the matrix of processed material. Sitting in a studio editing, as opposed to standing and directly filming, the sequences Campbell assembles by reprocessing mediated archival material eschew any claim to objectivity. Our culture's profound sense of groundlessness, its atemporality and loss of faith in a stable, fixed perspective from which to capture the truth, course throughout the work. Campbell's selection of multiple angle shots from the news media, most notably in *Bernadette*, is a potent signifier of this. Grappling with notions of the 'truth' and the 'factual' with a suitably wry, Beckettian strain of absurdism, the artist has described the inherent folly of

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his films by referring to them as "impossible documents". More pithily, discussing *Bernadette*, he pointedly asked, "how can you represent someone's life in 38 minutes?"


This scepticism regarding film's status as a transparent, indexical document of the real undercuts Campbell's work. His films frequently teeter on the edge of legibility and sense. At times, it can appear that the films are suffering cognitive breakdowns as the familiar structure of media narratives unwind and implode. The camera lurches and stumbles in *Bernadette*, the narrator in *Arbeit* becomes increasingly unreliable, and sound is frequently severed from image in *Make it New John*. Glitches, false starts and black marks pepper these films, collectively serving to puncture any sense of documentary business as usual. The Dadaist Tristan Tzara said art was only well when it was sick; at times, Campbell's films seem very sick indeed. The sickness is contagious: watching them can be a disorientating experience that necessitates active spectatorship, with the viewer mirroring the activities of the filmmaker; you literally have to put the film back together yourself.

Campbell has spoken of his desire not to lock his works into being purely a demonstration of the subjective, partisan nature of producing history, or to leave them caught in the loop of forever italicising truth. Real people *did* lose their jobs at DeLorean and Bernadette Devlin was treated shamefully by the Westminster government. There is, as the art critic Craig Owens once remarked, an indignity in speaking for others and Campbell, mindful that such a trap is inherent in the use of the archive, has acknowledged his responsibility towards these *material* people. If there is to be an ethics of the database, as Manovich asked for, then not regarding the circulating digital traces of people in the cloud archive as free-floating signifiers, unshackled from time and place, is obviously important. Campbell's ethical commitment results in his navigating between knowing that his archive sources are 'imaginary documents' and simultaneously allowing a space for the real to break through. Perhaps the best summation

of this is the artist and writer Daniel Jewesbury's remark about *Bernadette*: "It is precisely through not understanding her, not requiring her to add up, that something can be falteringly asserted".

One key aspect of Campbell's work is the variety of modes of attention his work invites. The aesthetic and cognitive engagements asked of his viewers fluctuate as much as the formal surfaces of the films. For instance, in *Bernadette* he manages to create a structure that accommodates shifts between humour, shock, anger, melancholia, self-reflexivity and sadness. The film's modulation through and staging of these various forms of attention avoids some of the habitual patterns of 'docu-fiction' or what Alfredo Cramerotti has called aesthetic journalism. By not purging forms of attention lacking artistic pedigrees, Campbell's films suggest that it's not just mainstream media reporting that has its ingrained habits for representing reality. Art might be part of the problem too.

In 2013, Campbell will be one of the artists representing Scotland at the Venice Biennale, and he has stated the work will pay homage to and reflect on Chris Marker and Alain Resnais's essay film *Les Statues meurent aussi*, which explored the intersection between cultural imperialism and the commercialisation of African art. As with his previous works, it promises to be an engrossing exploration of archival material as a 'node' for unfreezing the past in the present. Some of the work of Campbell's contemporaries can seem locked in a nostalgic embrace, or prone to a rather self-serving polarised aesthetic model in which entertainment is uniformly bad and abstracted criticality uniformly good. Campbell's ethics, aesthetics and poetics constitute a singular kind of mongrel entity.

Recently the cultural theorist Mark Fisher has spoken about the need for writers and artists to reverse the trend for dissenting voices to desert the mainstream and to contest this space with a reinvigorated form of populism that reclaims the word from the corporate hollowness that predominates. Campbell's films point to this possibility. The distinct tenor of Campbell's aesthetic imbues all his films with a radically entertaining, accessible and profoundly moving sensibility. The engrossing stories he creates from the database archive provoke thoughts and dreams of resistance and agency. 



'Bernadette'



'Arbeit'